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Chance and Necessity in History: E.H. Carr and Leon Trotsky Compared

Ann Talbot *

Abstract: »Zufall und Notwendigkeit in der Geschichte: E. H. Carr und Leon Trotsky im Vergleich«. It was E.H. Carr who dismissed counterfactual history or the “might-have-been” school of history as a “parlour game” in *What is History?* Carr’s rejection of counterfactual history was a response to Isaiah Berlin’s criticism of those who believed in the “vast impersonal forces” of history rather than giving priority to the role of the individual and the accidental. For Berlin, Carr was following in the footsteps of Hegel and Marx in regarding history as process that was determined and governed by necessity rather than chance. While the influence of both Hegel and Marx can be seen in Carr’s work, this article will argue that Carr’s approach to history is distinct from that to be found in classical Marxism as exemplified by Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, Labriola and Trotsky who always accepted the role of chance in history. It compares Carr’s historical method to that employed by Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution*.

Keywords: counterfactual, chance, necessity, E.H. Carr, Leon Trotsky, Isaiah Berlin, Marxism.

Counterfactual history or the “might-have-been” school of history, E.H. Carr declared to be a “parlour game” which was unworthy of a real historian. As far as Carr was concerned the task of the historian was to write about what happened not about what might have happened. History, for Carr, was a study of causes and to suggest that something other than what happened might have happened was to violate this cardinal principle of the discipline. For this reason he has often been accused of being a determinist who underestimated the role of the accidental in history. It was a perceived failing for which Isaiah Berlin took him to task. The dispute between Carr and Berlin is the subtext of Carr’s book *What is History?* in which he sets out his philosophy of history and dismisses the validity of counterfactuals. (Carr 1990)

The book was in large measure a reply to Berlin’s essay *Historical Inevitability* in which he had criticized those who believed in the “vast impersonal forces” of history rather than giving priority to the role of the individual and the accidental. (Berlin 1997) Berlin maintained that those who regarded history as a determined causal chain, in the manner of Hegel or Marx, denied the role of free will and the individual responsibility of history’s tyrants for the crimes they committed. Both Carr and Berlin wrote with sparkling wit, but their dis-

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pute concerned issues of pressing intellectual and political importance, since this was the height of the Cold War. What was at issue was Britain's attitude to the Soviet Union and its place in a putative nuclear war. The counterfactuals that Carr had in mind were those that suggested that some other outcome had been possible in Russia, that the 1917 Revolution was not inevitable, that the Bolsheviks might not have come to power and that instead the Provisional Government might have succeeded in maintaining its grip on events and managed to establish a parliamentary system.

An ideological dispute of this kind is so very un-British that there is not even a satisfactory English word for it, so I will use the German word. What we have here is a very British *Historikerstreit*. It was a dispute conducted in the most gentlemanly, oblique and mediated of terms and both sides were more likely to appeal to the commonsense of the average *Times* reader than high theory, but a *Historikerstreit* it was nonetheless. The national peculiarities of the time and class should not lead us to suppose that theoretical questions were not involved any more than we should suppose that political questions were not involved simply because they remained for the most part unstated.

The principle theoretical question that emerges from the dispute between Carr and Berlin is the role of chance and necessity in history which is what I propose to discuss in this article. If, like Berlin, one attributes a predominant role to chance in history then it is always possible to argue that events might have taken a different course if only circumstances had been slightly different and counterfactuals can play an important role. If, like Carr, the historian emphasizes the role of necessity in history, then events could not have taken an alternative course, counterfactuals play no role, since events were determined and inevitable. In writing on the relationship between chance and necessity Carr, the great historian of the twentieth century turned to one of the great actors in twentieth century history – Leon Trotsky. He is, in a sense, a third participant in the Carr-Berlin *Historikerstreit*.

As a child in St Petersburg, Berlin witnessed the Russian revolution that Trotsky led and which Carr encountered as a temporary clerk on the Northern desk at the Foreign Office. This key event of the twentieth century made Berlin and his family exiles and it ultimately made Carr into the historian we know rather than a minor diplomat. It is their different approaches to this event as historians that will figure in this article. Berlin admits counterfactuals and the role of the accidental in history but not determinism, Carr is a determinist who rejects the accidental as a factor in historical causality while Trotsky, who was a not inconsiderable historian himself, is a determinist who nonetheless admits counterfactuals.

Both Carr and Trotsky saw the Russian revolution as an event that was historically determined. Where they differed was in the role that each accorded to chance or accident. Carr's *History of Soviet Russia* is peppered with references to Trotsky, often approving, and in many respects his analysis of the revolution

agrees with that of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. Carr liked to quote A.L. Rowse's remark that the difference between Sir Winston Churchill's book about the First World War, *The World Crisis*, and Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* was that Churchill's book had "no philosophy of history behind it". (Carr 1990, 20) The idea that one might need a philosophy of history was something of a novelty in Britain at that time and Carr, who was influenced by the British Hegelian R.G. Collingwood, played a significant role in raising the intellectual level of historical studies in Britain. His influence on students was, on the whole, probably greater than that of Collingwood.

Carr was not a Marxist, but the infusion of Hegelianism from Collingwood perhaps predisposed him to think in dialectical terms, and he was sufficiently impressed by the events of the twentieth century to see economics as, in the final analysis, determinant. He famously wrote "There is a sense in which we are all Marxists now. We all seek to explain political history in terms of the underlying economic realities." (Haslam 1999, 54) For many people that would be enough to identify Carr as a Marxist and certainly for many of his critics, taken with his admirably objective *History of Soviet Russia*, it was sufficient evidence to condemn him. But I would argue that it is the difference between Carr's understanding of chance and Trotsky's attitude to chance that demonstrates the difference between Carr's economic determinism and Marxism.

The passage from Trotsky that Carr cited in *What is History?* when he was discussing the role of chance runs as follows:

The entire historical process is a refraction of historical law through the accidental. In the language of biology, we might say that the historical law is realized through the natural selection of accidents. (Trotsky 1971, 515)

It was a theory that Carr professed to find "unsatisfying and unconvincing." (Carr 1990, 102) Accidents happened and could not be ignored by the historian, but they did not enter into the significant hierarchy of causes for Carr.

Trotsky's comment is a revealing statement about the historical method that he habitually employed. It comes in the middle of a discussion about the developing conflict during 1923 between Trotsky on the one side and Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev on the other, and is followed by an account of Trotsky's hunting trips. This is, incidentally a wonderful example of Trotsky's literary ability, demonstrating both his capacity to depict the Russian landscape and to sketch brilliant character studies. But he had a purpose in making this digression. His intention was to explain the accident that excluded him from the discussions that took place in the leadership of the Bolshevik Party during the autumn and winter of 1923/4. After a night spent waiting in the marshes for wild duck he stepped out of his tent still wearing his felt boots and into the icy water, soaking his feet and giving himself a chill and an illness that was to last for months. "One can foresee a revolution or a war," wrote Trotsky, "but it is impossible to foresee the consequences of an autumn shooting-trip for wild ducks." (Trotsky 1971, 519)

This is not the only occasion on which Trotsky writes about the role of the accidental in history. Discussing the emergence of Kornilov's insurrection in his *History of the Russian Revolution* he writes: "An accident occurred, which like all historic accidents opened the sluice-gates of necessity." (Trotsky 1977, 715) Trotsky's comments point to an aspect of Marxism that is often overlooked. The accidental, the contingent and the individual are often thought to have no role in historical materialism because it is deterministic, but in writing about accident in this way Trotsky was working within a tradition of classical Marxism that can be traced from Marx and Engels, to Labriola and Plekhanov.

History would "be of a very mystical nature, if 'accidents' played no part," Marx wrote. "These accidents naturally form part of the general course of development and are compensated by other accidents. But acceleration and delay are very much dependent on such 'accidents,' including the 'accident' of the character of the people who first head the movement." (Marx and Engels 1965, 319-20).

Engels, in the well known letter to Bloch, writes of an "endless host of accidents (that is of things and events whose inner interconnection is so remote or so impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent, as negligible)..." through which the necessary economic tendencies are finally asserted. (Marx and Engels 1965, 498).

Labriola rejected schematic theories of history and insisted that "History has always received a definite form, with an infinite number of accidents and variations." (Labriola 2005, 233).

Plekhanov takes issue with what he calls "fatalist" historians who maintain that history is determined by general causes and that accidents play no role. He cites Pascal's remark that history would have been different if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter. Carr uses the same example in *What is History?* and puts Trotsky's duck hunting accident into the same category as Cleopatra's nose. (Carr 1990, 98) Both, he maintains, are not so much examples of chance as of phenomena that are caused by chains of events that are not in the historian's hierarchy of causes. But Plekhanov does not dismiss the case of Cleopatra's nose so readily and, in a discussion of the Seven Years War, demonstrates that accidents played a role within the parameters determined by the socio-political conditions of Europe at that time.

Plekhanov cites Hegel on the role of the fortuitous or accidental. "In everything finite there are accidental elements." Accidents he insists are something relative and appear "only at the point of intersection of *inevitable* processes." (Plekhanov 1961, 305)

It is this dynamic inter-relationship between accident and necessity, between the inevitable process and the fortuitous incident where determined processes intersect, that characterizes Trotsky's historical method and which distinguishes it from Carr's method. Baruch Knei-Paz has drawn attention to the way in which Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* resolves some of the

central enigmas of history in general and of the history of revolution in particular. "Trotsky," writes Knei-Paz, "continuously confronts the problem of the personal element as against the social, the accidental as against the pre-designed and, in terms of drama, manages to convince, not by theorizing on the relative importance of each but by relating the one to the other." (Knei-Paz 1976, 506).

What he is referring to is precisely those points that Plekhanov writes of at which inevitable processes collide. Trotsky explains that in writing the *History of the Russian Revolution* he identified four processes which

...conditioned by the social structure of the country formed the background of the whole narrative: the evolution of the consciousness of the proletariat from February to October; the change of the moods in the army; a growth of peasant vindictiveness; the awakening and insurgence of the oppressed nationalities. (Trotsky 1972, 184).

Elsewhere he writes of "Two causalities [which] moved toward each other at an angle and, at a certain moment, they came into hostile conflict." (Trotsky 1973, 363).

In passing, I should say here that when Trotsky speaks about numerous causalities he is not referring to the theory of causality by multiple factors, which was highly influential in Russia at the time of the revolution thanks to the work of N.K. Mikhailovsky (Billington 1958) and probably still represents one of the most common views of historical causality. Trotsky was certainly influenced by the theory of factors as a young man, but developed a powerful critique of it after reading Labriola in prison which is expressed in his *History of the Russian Revolution*. In a later work, Trotsky explains that there is necessarily an arbitrary character to these more or less self-contained factors because they do not arise from the material conditions of society. They are rather imposed on the facts from above. (Trotsky 1981, 391-409) Trotsky's multiple causalities are always materially and historically determined.

It is precisely the interaction of the four processes which Trotsky identifies that gives rise to moments of chance in the course of the Russian revolution whose outcome cannot be adequately predicted in advance. The historian who studies these events in retrospect must admit the possibility of an alternative or counterfactual course of events at these moments of collision between different causalities and hence, in some cases, of the outcome of the entire revolution. Knei-Paz draws attention to the way in which Trotsky captures the uncertainty of crucial moments in the revolution as when the crowd confronts the ranks of soldiers and the loyalty of the army wavers. The dramatic force of the description lies in the fact that the confrontation could just as easily go either way. The confrontation is determined, but the outcome is not.

This is more than a literary device. Other historians such as Alexander Rabinowitch have drawn attention to this dramatic uncertainty in the events of the revolution. (Rabinowitch 1979) Carr himself is sensitive to it in practice,

despite his own theoretical misgivings about it. But where Carr and many other historians cease to be sensitive to the role of chance is in relation to the subsequent revolutionary situations that emerged during the twentieth century and did not result in a successful revolution.

There is an element of fatalism in this that is not consistent with the historian's task. The historian who gives due weight to both chance and necessity must inevitably consider the counterfactual possibilities. I do not wish to suggest that many narratives are all equally possible and equally valid in the manner of post-modernism. The historian's counterfactuals cannot be simply a matter of wishful thinking or fancy. They have to be securely rooted in the material conditions of the society in question, as Trotsky's certainly were. Carr dismissed the possibility of revolution in the West, but leading statesmen took Trotsky and the threat of revolution which he embodied seriously even when he was in exile. It is ironic that the politician who considers the counterfactual possibilities inherent in a situation tends to be considered a wise statesman while the historian who dismisses those same counterfactuals after the event tends to be regarded as a sober judge of evidence. The counterfactual may not have become actual, but that may be due to actions taken by historical actors who were conscious of the possibility that it might. The historian who attempts to understand the twentieth century should reflect the possibility of revolution. Not to do so is to fail to reflect the temper of the times. What we are left with if we remove the counterfactual from history is a vision of history as an abstract impersonal force rather than as a living process. "Let us not forget that revolutions are accomplished through people," Trotsky reminds his readers, "although they be nameless. Materialism does not ignore the feeling, thinking and acting man, but explains him. What else is the task of the historian?" (Trotsky 1977, 511)

Berlin was in that sense correct when he accused Carr of elevating "vast impersonal forces" at the expense of chance and the role of the individual. But Berlin's conception of chance is not historically grounded. Trotsky's conception of chance was of the unpredictable event that emerged from the collision of two or more historically determined causalities. Berlin's, by contrast, was the product of the individual will and was intensely voluntaristic, harking back to the German Romantics he admired so much. Berlin allowed chance a sweeping field of operation.

Carr, on the other hand, was uncomfortable with chance. He admitted it rather begrudgingly because he accepted that there were inevitably many facts of which the historian must remain ignorant. In this his attitude was a very Humean one and quite distinct from the approach to chance that classical Marxism derived from Hegel. As far as Hume was concerned chance did not really exist or only existed in a subjective sense. In Hume's philosophy chance is merely the term that we apply to a phenomena when we are ignorant of its causes. This is not the case in Hegel's method. Hegel's understanding of

chance is more closely related to that of Aristotle who distinguished between the potential (*dunamai*) and the actual (*energeai*). (Inwood 1992, 197) When Trotsky, Plekhanov, Labriola or Marx speak of chance it is in this sense of “potential” rather than in the Humean sense of something whose causes are unknown. Isaac Deutscher, who collaborated with Carr over many years, pointed to this empirical foundation of his friend’s thought:

It is very difficult, or perhaps impossible for him to get out of his skin, theoretically and ideologically. He is steeped in English empiricism and rationalism, his mind is very far from what to him are abstract dialectical speculations, and so he cannot really break down the barrier between his own way of thinking and Marxism. (Haslam 1999, 140)

Yet instinctively and against his own better judgement Carr often arrived at very similar conclusions to Trotsky – this was particularly so in his conception of the Russian revolution as a mass action that was the result of fundamental causes that undermined both the Tsarist regime and the Provisional Government. He maintained that “the Bolsheviks succeeded to a vacant throne” (Carr 1966, 36) Carr may not have agreed with Trotsky on the counterfactual, but he never doubted his historical stature and that the revolution he led had been the result of changes in the consciousness of millions of people. His approach to the Russian revolution is immensely objective. He was the distinguished forerunner of a whole cohort of historians who began to subject the events and ideas of the Russian revolution to critical examination in the course of the 1960s and 70s. Like Carr, all serious scholars then recognised Trotsky’s importance as a historical and intellectual figure. This is less so today. Carr’s approach to Trotsky is far more objective than that to be found in recent biographies such as those by Dmitri Volkogonov, (Volkogonov 1996) Geoffrey Swain (Swain 2006) and Ian Thatcher (Thatcher 2003). As a recent reviewer remarked “When one turns to the texts now being presented to students, it becomes immediately apparent that we are living in a very different – and far less healthy – intellectual environment ” than the one that existed then. (North 2007, 13).

In the years since Carr wrote his seminal history of the Soviet Union his objectivity has become the exception not the rule among historians and it is now common to view the Russian revolution as the work of few conspirators. To get a measure of the change that has taken place it is instructive to contrast two reviews by Richard Pipes. The first is a review of Carr’s *History of the Soviet Union* that he wrote in the *American Historical Review* in 1966 in which Pipes declared that there was “no history of Soviet foreign policy in the 1920s that can remotely compare with Carr’s treatment as far as factual coverage is concerned.” Carr, he said, was “a one-man encyclopaedia.” (Haslam 1999, 248) Some thirty years later Pipes had changed his opinion. In a review of Jonathan Haslam’s biography of Carr for the *Times* dated September 10, 1999 and entitled “A Very Cold Fish” Pipes announced that “A History of Soviet Russia ...

remains ... largely unread, even by specialists". The book is flawed, Pipes claimed, because Carr had a "cold, self-centred personality," and "took no interest in human beings: indeed, he was something of a misanthrope." Pipes was particularly offended that when he encountered Carr in the "Professors' Hall" of the Lenin Library the older man did not spring to his feet and embrace him. This alleged personal coldness was the "fatal flaw that robbed Carr's historical writings of both insight and readability."

Pipes's review was an extraordinary *ad hominem* attack on a man who could no longer defend his reputation, but it accurately reflected the way in which the prevailing standards of scholarship had changed. Berlin would never have written in this manner because both Berlin and Carr shared the assumption that history had a certain objective basis and was not simply a matter of subjective opinion. Their debate over the role of determinism, chance and counterfactuals took place within this context. It is an outlook that many historians no longer share. History is widely understood to be an entirely subjective narrative of past events with no significant objective basis in facts that are distinct from the historian's own point of view. The writing of history is therefore no longer a study of causality as it was for Carr, but is determined by the psychological propensities of the historian. Historical debate does not need to consider differing philosophies of history since it is simply a question of identifying those psychological characteristics, quirks and flaws in an opponent that have shaped the narrative. Carr's distinctive analysis of the causes of the Russian revolution can be dismissed because of his alleged psychological flaws.

Pipes's character assassination did not go unanswered. One of Carr's former students replied in a letter to the *Times* on 17 September objecting to this "ill natured review" which he wrote "demonstrates that in the field of Soviet studies the Cold War is not yet over." Pipes's review was suffused with the triumphalism that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. What, wondered Pipes, would Carr have done if he had lived long enough to see that collapse? The answer to that is very simple. As a good historian Carr would have buried himself in the documents that were becoming available and assiduously worked through them in an attempt to discover the reason why the Soviet Union had collapsed. With his customary objectivity, he might well have ended by concluding a final volume of his epic history by agreeing with Trotsky that the reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union was that the bureaucrat had devoured the workers' state before the working class had dealt with the bureaucrat. (Trotsky 1991, 243) Whatever the shortcomings of his philosophy of history, Carr's *History* stands head and shoulders above that of many current works and a vitality which they lack. It undoubtedly represents a highpoint of historical scholarship.

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